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Black Women at BSU: A Qualitative Study of Relationship- Building Challenges at a Predominantly White Institution

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Abstract

This study sought to better understand the challenges of relationship formation as perceived by black, female students at Bridgewater State University (BSU). In particular, the study sought to understand what specific challenges black women at BSU experience in forming relationships with professors and with their peers in friendships and romantic relationships; whether these challenges have changed over time; and whether these challenges are similar to or different from those faced by the subjects other researchers have studied. The research will be useful to students, faculty, and the administrators at BSU and can be used to inform these groups about the experiences of black female students. This research also aims to make black female students feel more comfortable to form relationships in a college setting.

Methodology

This study inquired about academic, social, and romantic relationships, understanding these to be crucial in college students' lives. Current BSU students' experiences with relationship-building were compared to those of BSU alumnae to determine whether there has been a change over time in these perceived challenges of relationship formation. A total of four alumnae and five current students were interviewed. IRB approval to reach out to subjects was necessary to begin inquiring about interview candidates. Once responses were gained, subjects were given a color chart of makeup shades and were asked to identify a close match to skin tone. This approach was done to determine if skin tone impacted a student or alumna's experience within the school system. For example, did a lighter-skinned person have an easier time adjusting to a predominantly white institution (PWI) while a darker-skinned person had a harder time adjusting to a PWI (or vice versa)? A color chart of makeup shades was used because this approach appeared less uncomfortable for the subjects and acted as an ice breaker as applying makeup or choosing a foundation for themselves is a task that most women feel comfortable doing as part of their routine. The decision to use a makeup shade chart also stemmed

from the fact that shade ranges for women of color have always been substantially limited. In the article "A Shade Better," Baze Mpinja describes her efforts to find makeup for her dark skin in 2011:

> I was shocked to hear the representative explain that the line was for women of all skin tones, yet I could see it came in only three shades: fair, light/medium, and medium. As she spoke, she avoided looking at me and my darker-than-medium skin. Finally, a colleague jumped in and asked what darker women were supposed to use. She didn't have an answer. It was awkward. I felt confused and angry, just like I did in high school when I watched my lighter-skinned friends buy makeup, while I was left empty-handed. (82)

The above experience described is one that occurs for many dark-skinned women. It would have been interesting if the women we interviewed could not find their skin tone, but none of them had this problem. However, a few did comment on the limited options black women have available to them as they were already aware of this problem within the makeup industry. Again, determining a close match was necessary to find out whether skin tone made a difference regarding how the subject was treated. For example, subjects who presented as dark-skinned may have experienced more challenges on-campus vs. a light-skinned person or vice versa. Only three participants identified as light-skinned while the remaining six identified as dark-skinned. Our study was not able to determine whether skin tone made a difference in students' experience; however, Student 5 was able to reflect openly on the issue:

> I'm aware that as a light skin black woman I have privilege...I don't like to say that I have privilege because I feel like, oh my gosh, I'm not an oppressor...But I realize that I do. You know what I mean? I realize what that means. I, as a light-skinned black woman, do my part to make sure that I'm not sitting here taking advantage of this privilege and not representing and talking for my black and dark-skin sisters. ...I have cousins that are dark-skinned. You know? And they're like my sisters...So if somebody tried to say something about dark skin women, I'll tell you. Don't try it. (Student 5)

Student 5 acknowledged that her fairer skin gave her

privilege in the black community. For Student 5, being aware of this issue means sticking up for her darker-skinned sisters that are underrepresented or treated unfairly in the community.

The results were broken down into several categories including skin tone, lack of representation, lack of understanding/exposure, rigid policies, stereotypes/bias, feeling of being "other," code-switching, hair, changes over time, romantic relationships, relationship success, advice for faculty, advice for students, and coping strategies. Our study found that lack of representation, the burden of representation, and the feeling of being "other" proved to have the most substantial impact on the students and alumnae interviewed because these categories all came up during eight out of the nine interviews. Subjects were asked to consider both what they believe has led to the successes and challenges they have encountered and what possible solutions could be implemented to counteract the challenges expressed. Interviews were conducted in person for 1–2 hours regarding each interviewee's experiences of forming academic, social and romantic relationships at BSU. As another result of having a small sample size, there were no candidates from the LGBTQA community despite efforts to be inclusive. After each interview, a transcription was completed, and challenges that the subjects experienced were analyzed and grouped into themes and shared experiences.

Interview Subjects' Demographic Information

Alumna 1

Age: Early Thirties

Year at BSU: 2005-2011

Immigrant status: First generation college student graduate

Self-identified race/ethnicity: Black, Afro-Caribbean, American, specifically Trinidadian

Skin Tone: Medium Brown Skinned

Alumna 2

Age: Attended BSU as an adult

Year at BSU: 2012-2014

Immigrant status: First generation college student

Self-identified race/ethnicity: Cape Verdean

Skin Tone: Light skinned

Alumna 3

Age: Early Thirties

Year at BSU: Graduated 2009

Immigrant status: African American

Self-identified race/ethnicity: Black

Skin Tone: Medium Brown Skin tone

Alumna 4

Age: Mid Twenties

Year at BSU: 2013 - 2017

Immigrant status: African American

Self-identified race/ethnicity

Skin Tone: Dark skinned black woman

Student 1

Age: Early Twenties

Year at BSU: Senior

Immigrant status: n/a

Self-identified race/ethnicity: Ugandan

Skin Tone: Dark Skinned

Student 2

Age: Early Twenties

Year at BSU: Senior

Immigrant status: n/a

Self-identified race/ethnicity: Somalian

Skin Tone: Dark Skinned

Student 3

Age: Early Twenties

Year at BSU: Junior/ Senior

Immigrant status: African American

Self-identified race/ethnicity: Black

Skin Tone: Medium Brown Skinned

Student 4

Age: Twenty- Three

Year at BSU: Senior

Immigrant status: Came to U.S in 2014

Self-identified race/ethnicity: Cape Verdean

Skin Tone: Dark Skinned

Student 5

Age: Early Twenties

Year at BSU: Senior

Immigrant status: Acquiring Green Card

Self-identified race/ethnicity: Haitian

Skin Tone: Light Skinned

Review of Prior Research

Throughout this study, the subjects shared powerful testimonies regarding their experiences at PWIs. Their experiences are congruent with past research about black women in PWIs. Lack of representation, the burden of representation, and the feeling of being "other" proved to have the most substantial impact on the students and alumnae interviewed. This is because these three themes were consistently mentioned by each interviewee, aside from student 3. *The Agony of Education* by Joe R. Feagin et.al has been useful in finding common themes through this research. Feagin explains, "historically, educational institutions

and educators have been among the most active and effective instruments for the oppression of black people" (7). Black women on campuses can become targets of this oppression. Feagin continues, "Most traditionally white northern and southern universities had very few black faculty members into the 1970s. Even today, most of the nation's predominantly 'white' colleges and universities have only token numbers of African-American faculty members" (11). The issue of tokenism/ the feeling of being "other" was a recurring theme found amongst previous research and in our interviews. When discussing black women faculty, Sherri Wallace et al.'s article "Black Women as Scholars and Social Agents: Standing in the Gap" explains the importance of including faculty of color on campus:

> Because of underrepresentation on campus, often these women—not being privy to mentoring, informal networks, and information—work in isolation that can have detrimental effects on morale and job satisfaction, which may cause some of them to leave the academy altogether. (Fries-Britt & Turner-Kelly, 2005; Wallace et al., 2010) (45)

The inclusion of black faculty is essential to the campus environment. The article goes on to suggest:

> The feelings of isolation and perceptions of hostility by Black women faculty are often associated with their research interests. When underrepresented faculty study issues of race and ethnicity, gender, or poverty, they realize that their work may be undervalued and their chances at promotion and tenure smaller because their research may be construed as too narrow (Wallace et al., 2010). In fact, women academics, in particular, are most likely to feel scrutinized by their colleagues and report great concerns that their research is not valued (Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). (49)

As described above, stereotypes such as perceptions of hostility or anger surround black women and their research interests. Alumna 2 and students 1 and 2 have voiced these negative perceptions of black women on campus, especially when it comes to undervaluing the quality of work or topics chosen**.**

Even still, according to *Black Women, White Campus: Students Living Through Invisibility*, "African American females consistently represent the largest minority participation group in higher education since the late seventies" (Shabazz 78).

Even more specifically, African American women outnumber African American males who attend higher education institutions, yet there have not been any substantial breakthroughs in research dedicated solely to Black women at PWIs (Bailey- Fakhoury and Frierson 213). This claim is supported by "Black Women Undergraduates: Challenging History to Reframe Its Context in a PWI," which states:

> ...research about black students is often viewed from the black male perspective and leaves little room to interpret what challenges or differences gender might have on the educational experience. What becomes troubling is that as a result of analyzing black women from only one or no distinct vantage points, "one analysis often implicitly denies the validity of the other." (Moore 361)

Success in college is crucial to receiving a degree; therefore, it is imperative to understand aspects of college life that may inhibit the ability to achieve these goals for "lower-represented" groups especially where retention rates may sputter. As a result, this research was dedicated to exploring the challenges black women face at PWIs. *Black Women, White Campus: Students Living Through Invisibility* states:

> As of 2008, African American females represented 64% of all African American college participants and obtained over 67% of the degrees awarded to this group. Roughly 32% of the African American population is pursuing higher education compared to 44% of the White population and therefore addressing the enrollment retention and degree attainment continues to be a priority. Additionally, only 11% of African American college attendees are enrolled in historically Black colleges and universities, indicating that the remaining 89% of African American students likely attend predominantly White institutions across the country (Shabazz 2).

These statistics show that a significant amount of the African American female population is willing to pursue a degree in higher education and excel while doing so. It is also evident that there is a need to analyze the black female population attending PWI's as those in attendance at PWI's greatly outnumber those at HBCU's.

Another study, titled "Black Women Attending Predominantly White Institutions: Fostering Their Academic Success Using African American Motherwork Strategies," shares the same sentiment as

well. The purpose of this research was to help other researchers, educators, and administrators gain a better understanding of the academic success strategies of some African American women attending PWI's and offer suggestions for how PWI's can better support these young black women. Bailey-Fakhoury and Frierson write:

> In PWI's, Black students tread in territory 'consciously or half consciously [thought of as] *white places*' (Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996, p. 51). These physical spaces (e.g., classrooms, cafeterias, libraries, playgrounds, etc.) become racialized, establishing who belongs, and where, and who controls the space. This exercise in racial demarcation is played out through every day microaggressions (e.g., avoidance, exclusion, being told one speaks well, exposure to stereotypic images in media, etc.) or subtle actions of discrimination. (218)

This study is devoted to "describing the impact of attending a PWI has on African American women" (218).

Finally, the study points out the difficulties of self-worth and the prospect of romantic relationships for black women attending PWI's:

> It appears that young Black women with a strong racial identity are more likely to have high self-esteem and Beauty ideals which are related to possessing a positive body image. However, black women attending PWI's report significantly lower life satisfaction and less cultural congruity ... Additionally, young Black women at PWI's struggle with social isolation and limited prospects for dating (Ariza & Berkey, 2009; Henry, 2008). (219)

One of the participants interviewed voiced the same concerns when it came to beauty standards and building romantic relationships on campus. Alumna 4 voiced her concerns surrounding the limited options for black women on campus. Alumna 4 says:

> I do think that black women on campus are very isolated when it comes to the dating pool. I mean, just like the way you're on campus and once you have a car you can't go out anywhere looking for a date unless you go into Boston. But you had to be very intentional about that, and I just think it's not an easy dating pool, because I felt like most of the black men on campus are either dating white girls predominantly, or, if they weren't dating within

> their color, they were dating predominantly light-skinned women. I don't think I can think of maybe two relationships where both people were about the same skin tone or dark skin, so, like, close to my skin tone, and it was very few women of color I found where they have a successful quote on quote publicly successful relationship... Nobody has money or the time, and I didn't really hear about my black friend stating that women are guys seriously. I definitely heard a lot about people wanting sex/ hookups but that's college for you, everybody wants to hook up. But in terms of actually dating that was a complete [failure] dub. It was really a dub as a black woman on campus. I felt like everyone loves white girls or light-skinned girls and actually my natural look had a bit of an effect on it. This was still the time where natural hair was becoming more accepted, but it wasn't necessarily seen as something that was truly attractive or beautiful. (Alumna 4)

Equivalent to the study above Alumnae 4 summarizes the same overall idea of beauty standards and limited dating prospects. When the topic of skin color appeared, Alumnae 4 believes that the black men on campus perceived "lighter skinned" women or white women as more desirable, noting that, " I don't think I can think of maybe two relationships where both people were about the same skin tone or dark skin." Alumnae 4 argues the prospect for dating on campus for black women is limited. This is due to skin color, undesirable location on campus, financial insecurity, lack of time, hookup culture, and the inability to recognize natural hair as beautiful. Factors such as isolation on campus, negative stereotypes, microaggressions, the undervaluing of worth ethic and idealized beauty standards contribute to a challenging environment for nurturing academic relationships, creating social relationships with peers and fostering potential romantic relationships on campus. Mental health and success in college are crucial to receiving a degree in college; therefore, it is imperative to understand aspects of college life beyond academics that affect the steps necessary to achieve these goals, especially for lower represented groups where retention rates stagger.

Research Findings

Lack of Representation

Numerous subjects interviewed revealed that lack of representation created a barrier between them and

the people in their classrooms, including professors and classmates. Lack of representation, in terms of race, is when people feel there is no one who looks like them, which is a common theme for black students in a PWI. As Constantine and Watt explain, "Black women attending PWIs report significantly lower life satisfaction and less cultural congruity or 'fit' between students' personal values and the values of the environment in which they operate than their counterparts at historically Black colleges and universities" (185).

A lack of representation often results in a lack of understanding of Black women's perspectives as well. Alumna 1, 2, 3, and 4 and student 1 described experiencing a lack of understanding when it came to receiving grades from their professors. Alumna 1 shared how she received lower grades on assignments related to her culture. Alumna 1 reflected on an assignment she turned in about the issue of colorism in a commercial advertisement. In the assignment, she emphasized that "lighter-skinned" people receive better treatment. She says, "they couldn't grade me because it made them feel some kind of way." The subject appeared to be frustrated because she was under the impression that her grade was based on a lack of understanding of a topic that is culturally specific. This experience is reiterated by previous research, "Research services at state universities and on other campuses indicate that from a fifth to half of African-Americans report that they have received unfair grades because of their skin color" (Feagin et al. 98). Similarly, students in this research have attested to receiving lower grades than their peers due to their having different experiences while living as a minority. All of the subjects, except for students 4 and 3, also described receiving differential treatment because they are black. The author of *The Agony of Education* highlights that "all students who write on creative topics run the risk of displeasing teachers who are not informed on such topics or who have a different perspective" (100).

Additional research has determined that African American women have been significantly underrepresented in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) majors and careers. According to *The Plight of Students of Color at Predominantly White Institutions*, "representation of black women in STEM significantly lessens in and beyond higher education. African American women who committed to STEM fields had insufficient high school preparation for college-level science and math curriculum" (Robertson 83). When talking about her

experience as a chemistry major Student 5 says, "We don't have enough women, people who look like us in the field that can be like 'I've made it this far,' so I feel like because they don't see it, they just kind of look at us like we're not gonna make it far in the classroom." This particular student recalls being able to count on hand how many students of color are in the field with her. This confirms previous research which highlights the fact that black students are underrepresented in STEM fields: "Having more African American women in these fields may be the key to attracting and retaining more students in these majors in college and beyond within STEM careers...even fewer African American women have completed bachelor's degrees and advanced degrees in these fields" (Robertson 83). Student 5 recalls a situation with an advisor as experienced by one of her black classmates:

> If they're not doing well, instead of trying to be like hey, why aren't you doing well? How can I help you? They are like "maybe this isn't the major for you". And I'm like that's not what you're supposed to do as an advisor. You're supposed to be like what's going on? How can I help you improve? Let's talk about your studying habits. But instead, they will be like, "oh maybe this isn't the major for you", or "after you graduate maybe you should think about going back". And one of my friends, one of their advisors told them, "maybe you should think about going into a trade program like nursing." ... If they think that you're not good enough for the major, they look down on you. (Student 5)

Speaking to students during the advising period about options that will help them succeed academically and make sense financially makes students feel like they are being heard thus increasing their options and building their confidence in their chosen major.

Lack of both black faculty and students resulted in black women feeling the burden of representation. This is when the "only black person" in the class feels the pressures of being the representative for their entire race: "The experience here is not unique. When racial issues come up in this classroom, some white students are tight-lipped, and a black student becomes the center of attention" (Feagin et.al. 86). Student 1, student 2, and student 5 described that when talking about slavery in classes, the white students would stare, and the professors would turn to the black students for validation to determine the accuracy of the material. Student 1 says, "Everybody

would look at me, including the professors expecting me to know the answer... sometimes I do know the answer, but I don't want to *feel* like that." Similarly, student 2 describes an experience in her world dance class. The professor questioned her about African dance asking, "Is this true? Is this right?" but the student replied, "I'm not all of Africa." She explains how she cannot speak for every African country. Someone who is not a person of color might think, "well, of course, we'd ask the black person. They should know. They *must* have experience with this." However, this may not always be the case, and even if it is, calling out the only black person in a classroom creates a feeling of isolation, reminding them that they're different. The pressure to have the right response while correctly representing their entire race is a burden no one should have to face.

This lack of understanding extends beyond schoolwork to interpersonal interactions as well. Some subjects expressed that some of the professors lacked an understanding of their personal issues or circumstances. Student 5 recalls a particular professor's lack of understanding when she explained that she is not eligible for FAFSA because of her immigrant status. Student 5 says, "I can't get my money from the government for school ... I've met professors that I've told- and they've been like whatever, and I have met professors that I've told and they're active on trying to help me find ways for me to fund my education. It's important to me because it's another added stressor on top of being in school ... I need professors to understand that that's something that I go through." When she presents this information to professors, she expects them to understand or sympathize with what she is going through. With limited financial help, she must be a full-time worker and student. She appreciates those who are active in helping her fund her education versus those who are not as eager to offer support. Student 1 says that if there were more professors of color, they could present the information about black history sensibly. She says that because her professors can't relate to her, they may not understand that they uncomfortably relay the information. As a result of a lack of understanding, students may not be able to express themselves authentically and thus may be academically hindered.

Rigid Policies

Equally as difficult as representation challenges, rigid policies can create room for discrimination and the perception of discrimination. Rigid policies are strict standards or guidelines where professors hold students accountable. In alumna 1's experience, she was late

to class because, before adjustments were made to the scheduling structure here at BSU, the gaps between classes were not long enough to walk from one class to another. As a result, the professor would take points off her grade. Even after explaining the reason behind her tardiness, the professor was still set on carrying out his policy. It was not until she persistently advocated for herself that he finally relented. Student 2 faced a similar experience of rigidity within the classroom during the "add-drop" period when her professor marked her absent even though she was not yet registered to be his student. Student 2 brought her concerns to the chair, but nothing happened to alleviate this problem. Zero tolerance policies carried out by staff may make people feel as though they are being targeted whether they are or not. According to *The Agony of Education*, "To challenge your professor in such circumstances requires more status of power than students, black or non-black, ordinarily have" (Feagin et al. 88). Our study seemed to confirm that as a minority student, it can be hard to advocate for yourself and fight for what you need in a situation of injustice. It is crucial to acknowledging extenuating circumstances and give students the room to make adjustments so that they will be successful within the classroom.

Preconceived Notions

Holding preconceived notions, biases or stereotypes to be true negatively affects treatment towards other people. Black women have been negatively labeled with stereotypes about their culture and physical appearance. Common misconceptions depict black women as violent, angry, "ghetto," lazy, or unintelligent. When building relationships on campus, some subjects have reported feeling that stereotypes had some effect on their ability to form friendships. Alumna 4 says, "I think most of my friends I keep close are black students or students of color, and I think just friendships across ethnicities, specifically with other white students, were hard because ... I feel like they had preconceived notions of who I was before I even opened my mouth." Other students and alumnae recalled instances in the classroom where the professor would ignore them. Student 5 recalls that the professor would not look at her or her black friends, but would default to looking at the white students. Only once, when she earned the highest grade in the class, then the professor would look at her. However, the professor still would not look at her friends and continued to look at the white students even if they weren't doing well in class. Alumna 1 says that some teachers ignored her when she would raise her hand

to participate, even though the other white students were not willing to participate. Alumna 1 says, "you get a sense of how people receive you or treat you." As a result, some of these students have expressed not feeling comfortable going to office hours or, in one case, refusing to take another course with that same professor. Alumna 2 found that professors and employers were often surprised that she, as a black woman, is well-spoken. Alumna 2 often heard people tell her, "You're so well-spoken and you're so intelligent, I just figured you just had to have a college degree." She was given the impression that they thought black people were not articulate. Knowing this may also create a burden for black people to constantly be "well-spoken" so that they can represent their race highly to compensate for these biases. Similarly, Student 5 recalls the moment she graduated and received her chemistry degree. She says, "I got to Summa and I was wearing a cord and ... one of the students that I was with was like 'oh you got Summa?' and I was like, 'yeah,' and he was like 'wow, what was your GPA?' You know what I mean, he was very surprised. I feel like it was more like he didn't expect it."

Code-Switching

Code-switching was another common factor that the subjects mentioned as a challenge in their relationships. According to the article "As A Black Woman, I Wish I Could Stop Code-Switching. Here's Why," code-switching is defined as "the practice of alternating between two or more ways of speaking in conversation such as African American vernacular or slang." When talking about social settings with her white colleagues, Alumna 2 admits:

> I would definitely catch myself, like, shoot, remember the audience. If there was an event where people were drinking, and, you know, I love a nice glass of wine, and, I'll have a laugh, but I won't have two. I don't want to mess up my code-switching or say something I regret … so they're very free to drink and do whatever they want, but there are always some consequences, so I have to sort of be on my guard and remain professional even when in a social setting ... some of the jargon you use may not be very acceptable and then you have to kind of start switching because you have to know your consumer. (Alumna 2)

Alumna 2 feels as though *they*, meaning white people, are free to do what they want but *she* carries the burden of messing up her code-switching. Michelle

Obama notes in her memoir *Becoming*, "but even today, with white students continuing to outnumber students of color on college campuses, the burden of assimilation is put largely on the shoulders of minority students" (74). In general, this may create a feeling of being inauthentic for black women as they don't want to be judged. Preconceived notions make Black female students unable to participate and even excel in their academics without their abilities being questioned.

Beauty Standards

Furthermore, cultural differences such as hair texture provoke challenges when these differences are not celebrated or embraced. Negative reactions to the natural state of black women's hair become a burden, making black women feel disconnected from the people around them. Alumna 1 provided an example of a time when she was asked to change out of her afro-puffs for a professional photo. She says, "I remember I had to take a professional photo for receiving an award on campus and I had my hair in afro puffs and the photographer for the campus asked me to like change my hairstyle." This begs the question, why was Alumna 1's hair not enough, and why can some races come as they are but a black woman's natural curl pattern is deemed "unprofessional"? Touching or making microaggressive comments about black hair is another issue that plagues the black female community as a result of white people's limited exposure to black people or not embracing their culture. Someone described student 5's hair as "wild and crazy." It's important to be mindful of the words that you say and the way that you speak to people because it may be perceived the wrong way.

Tokenism

Seeing that the students and alumna encountered these microaggressions, it is not surprising that they also faced the feeling of being tokenized or 'other.' Tokenism is the practice of doing something (such as hiring a person who belongs to a minority group) only to prevent criticism and give the appearance that people are being treated fairly (Merriam Webster). This issue is so widespread that there's even a character with the name of "Token" from the popular American television show *South Park*. In *The Agony of Education*, one black student shares his experience when visiting a PWI during his college search. He states, "And I felt bad; I felt out of place. One reason I didn't go was because it reeked of whiteness ... I was only there for two days, and after one day I wanted to leave" (Feagin et al. 5). In our study, Alumna 4 says, "I think I made it because I don't like that feeling of being tokenized or that feeling of being other. So I

really made my focus on the people who either look like me or other minority women. If I can't make myself comfortable in this space, I'll make myself comfortable somewhere else. People coming to campus need to know that there is a black community and that they won't be others and they won't be different and that they will be fully integrated and celebrated." Similar to the negative trend of being a token friend, Alumna 3 says:

> You're definitely, as a person of color, going to be that token friend. I remember years later I was telling one of my friends from grad school (and she is white) that I was in a sorority ... and we had like another friend who, I think, she's Pakistani, and I remember showing her my sorority pictures, and they were saying I was the only black girl, and I was probably a token black girl, and I was like, 'yeah, I definitely was.' They're probably like trying to just bring diversity to their thing. So that could actually work to your advantage if somebody is trying to bring some diversity and you're the only one that can bring it, that'll work. That can also be a challenge too. But I would say at the end of the day all this can play a role for some people, just don't put much focus in it, that's the only thing, because the challenge is that will put into your mind about these things. Your mind will be the biggest challenge at the end of the day. Many of these things you're just going to have to do, you can't switch it, you're just going to have to figure it out, make it work, and not get lost in your mind. (Alumna 3)

Alumna 3's perspective on tokenism is different from those of her black counterparts. Alumna 3 shares about being "socially desirable" for being Black but in a way that isn't quite equal to being a "token" which has a negative connotation attached to the word. Alumna 3 is aware that her skin color may have offered some sort of advantage when it came to joining the sorority. This advantage being diversity and a different world perspective.

Romantic Relationships

Forging romantic relationships in college is understood to be another important aspect or challenge in college students' lives. As Ariza and Berkey explain, "Young Black women at PWIs struggle with social isolation and limited prospects for dating" (54). Despite this, Student 1 notes:

> My education is my priority...I need to go to

> class I need to focus on this right now because the rest of that is going to be there, but I don't need to be focused on that [relationships] when I could have been in class. And sometimes when I am going through something hard, I need to remind myself 'Hey listen, this right now is important. You need to focus on this and at the end of the day that's going to matter more than whatever drama is happening'. I kind of have to do like a self-check and then go back and prioritize. (Student 1)

We have found that when alumna 1 and students 1, 3, and 4 were asked about romantic challenges, they could not provide in-depth answers about the challenges or successes they had when forging romantic relationships, as they were strictly focused on academics for the entirety of their education while at BSU. However, for the ones that did make some effort in forging romantic relationships, common challenges such as hookup culture, social pressure, experimentation, colorism, the need to code-switch, and lack of options to choose from interfered with building genuine romantic relationships at the university. Hookup culture was a problem because the remaining women aimed to have substantial relationships if they even pursued dating at all. Next, pressure from within or outside their race was a problem as dating outside your race might be seen as taboo in some cases. In cases where interracial dating might have been a possibility, the women vocalized that they did not feel like an option to white men or that white men were afraid to approach them. Also, code-switching was apparent when Student 5 recalled what happened to a woman she knew who was in an interracial relationship with a white man. The woman's partner would get offended when she spoke Haitian Creole around him when addressing her family members. The woman had immigrated to America when she was in college, so English was very much a second language to her. Similarly, experimentation or fetishization of black women was another problem that the subjects claimed white and black men were both guilty of committing. This leads to Colorism, when some black men tended to only date white women or "light-skinned" women. Student 5 says of a black student she knew, "He would have sex with a dark-skinned woman, but he wouldn't date black women. He would only date white women." Overall, limited prospects, experimentation, and colorism proved to create challenges when students actively sought to form romantic relationships on campus.

Correlations Between Students & Alumnae

Finding a correlation between the current BSU students and alumna and how they fared over time at a PWI was an important aspect of this research. Common themes that were observed were culture, code-switching, and beauty standards. When it comes to culture, the population of students at BSU in attendance has changed. Alumni 2 reflected on the current state of BSU and how it has changed since she attended as a student:

> When I first got here the students were primarily from Roxbury, Dorchester, and Brockton. I used to say this is the Multicultural Center and everybody has a culture and everybody's culture is different and it changes. The culture when you're five is not going to be the same as the culture you have when you're fifteen, and it's probably going to change when you're twenty-five again because it's based on your environment and the things and people around you that make you who you are and so it's a multi-culture. (Alumna 2)

Even though Bridgewater is still very much a PWI, the student population for people of color has increased in terms of location and will remain to do so over time.

One difference our research pointed out was that now there is a more widespread cultural understanding of and language for black women's experiences. For example, code-switching, as described by Alumna 1, is a term that has not always existed. Despite that, she found herself code-switching automatically which is something many black people may find themselves doing without even noticing it. Whether a subject refused to actively code switch or not, it was a reality for everyone. Lastly, beauty standards such as hair came up quite frequently. How people choose to respond or raise awareness about the issue has changed significantly within the last decade. Alumna 1 recalls a time when she lived on campus and people would comment about or make micro-aggressive comments towards her. She says, "I am not an animal, this is not a zoo do not touch my hair. But of course, we did not have a Solange song to say do not touch my hair [back then] but it is just a very real thing." The topic of black hair and how people respond has always been an issue. Alumna 1 was able to acknowledge that more recently mainstream media and artists have given black women a platform to discuss these issues that she did not have when she was a student at BSU between 2005 and 2011.

Despite the challenges previously mentioned,

the women were able to make great strides at BSU. In some cases, their skin tone proved to be an advantage as described by one student when she was sought out by a black professor, which led to future leadership opportunities. Alumna 1 says, "she encouraged me to stop by her office so that was the first time the faculty of, like a black woman had addressed me and made me feel open and like welcome to campus and um yea she continues to be my mentor till this day." As Feagin et al. explain, "The anxiety and fear generated by being a black person in a mostly white university are mitigated by the presence and support of other black students … in the context of the difficult situations the black students have described, this sticking together allows them to coexist with whites, to defend themselves, ... without feeling completely powerless" (74). This conclusion proves correct as Student 2 reported that her blackness was able to bring her together with other students of color. Student 2 reported that usually, she doesn't talk to anyone in the classroom because they don't talk to her. However, the one person she talked to in class was black. This shows that more diversity on campus can make people feel more comfortable to socialize. Alumnae 1, 3, and 4 and students 1, 2, and 5 admitted to feeling more comfortable with a group of people who looked like them and shared experiences.

Alumnae Advice for Faculty

Educators are essentially the gatekeepers to helping students achieve their goals, one of those goals being a diploma. Throughout the interviews conducted, alumnae were asked to help educate faculty so that faculty may assist students to help keep their goals on track. Alumna 1 says, "It's OK for black women to be assertive and strong, and, also, it's ok for them to express themselves in different tones. You have to learn to be accepting and respectful of that." When a woman of color asserts herself, she is often seen as angry and aggressive. This should not be the case when she is most likely just trying to advocate for herself. When a student comes to office hours or inquires about a grade, patience is key. Similarly, Alumna 3 noted that putting students in charge of other students has created some friction in the past. When selecting Resident Assistants (RA's), on-campus faculty must encourage RA's to get to know all the students in the campus dorms. That way if there is ever a complaint, a white RA will not feel intimidated to handle a complaint just because they haven't learned to interact with their residents of color. Alumni 2 also noted that having professors show up to student cultural clubs and organizations and spreading

the word to their students would be a great way to promote inclusivity on campus. Lastly, incorporating a teacher workshop or training on campus would promote cultural awareness.

Student Advice for Faculty

Current students of BSU that participated in the interviews were also encouraged to share advice that would assist faculty make BSU a supportive environment for students of color enrolled at the university. The burden of representation was a recurring problem mentioned by female students. Due to the lack of black people in classrooms, teachers sometimes called specifically on black people to explain or give their opinions on specific black issues. These students recalled feeling the pressure to speak for their entire race when this is not possible. Students suggested that there needs to be someone who can be there for the students when they run into these issues. The participants added that listening to the students' point of view and learning about other cultural backgrounds would create an inclusive environment. Additionally, students suggested that professors should take time to get to know their students to better guide them in the classroom. Asking questions like "how can I help you?" or "what are your study habits?" goes a long way. Unfortunately, when these students ran into issues on campus, they claimed that they received minimal help from professors, advisers, or departments on campus. *The Agony of Education* discusses mistreatment by professors: "Thus, on the exit questionnaire, the black students at state universities were asked, 'How often have you been mistreated by white professors at this campus because of your race?' Half replied that it had happened once or twice, while 6% said several times" (Feagin et al. 84). This type of behavior on campus is a common theme and happens much more than people may realize. It is important not to make assumptions about how a person will behave based on their race.

Suggestions for Current BSU Students

Alumnae and students also gave suggestions for current BSU students. Alumna 1 and 3 and students 1 and 3 suggested making the effort to connect with the professors. Student 2 reported that she failed to build a rapport with professors on campus due to a lack of effort on her behalf. Those same subjects agreed that getting to know professors and building connections would be useful and further propel students' educational careers. Creating strong support systems on campus is imperative: as a result, if a student finds themselves struggling academically, they will be able to confide in someone they trust. Alumna

3 says, “Don’t be afraid of documenting any racial or unsettling incidences you may witness.” Students should not be afraid to advocate for themselves. If a student feels as if they are being treated unfairly, they should seek aid from someone they trust and bring the issue to the attention of a professor in a respectful manner.

Campus Resources

All of the women interviewed were able to utilize campus resources throughout their academic career at BSU. Subjects had the mindset that they were here to graduate. This means that they focused on networking and forming beneficial relationships that will help them achieve their goals. Equally important, some women expressed a reliance on faith. Having a spiritual force aided them through hard times. The campus ministry acted as a haven for those identified as religious or spiritual. Another coping mechanism the subjects had was self-efficacy. This means believing in one’s own power and dismissing any doubts or false stereotypes that others may have. The Center for Multicultural Affairs (CMA) was mentioned frequently throughout the interviews by alumna 1, 2, 3, 4, and student 1. CMA is a common meeting spot that the women of color felt comfortable being in on campus. They stated that CMA provided social support, activities, and a meeting place for black students. Alumna 1 says, “the center at the time would have these chats with white women present with Staff members who were black and they would come together for the students so that we could talk about things whether it was like gender or like racial issues that we had on campus to help us navigate some of those things and help us prepare for the professional world of work.” The President’s office/task force was another resource students and alumni had utilized. The President’s office/task force offered campus climate surveys, which asked how people felt on campus. The Cape Verdean Students’ Association helped students build friendships and form bonds. The GLBTA Pride Center helped one subject figure out her sexual identity. Alumni 3 says, “At the Pride Center I started learning about different orientations and I’m like, oh, maybe I’m bisexual, but in the end, I found out I’m straight but it was just that journey about learning about these different sexual orientations and then I was the Ambassador, I was one of the people that tried to get gender-inclusive bathrooms at BSU.” Lastly, Sorority Life aided Student 3 feel more included. Originally founded in 1908 as one of the first black female sororities, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority

Incorporated has worked tirelessly to provide a safe space for women of color to be uplifted, while giving back to the community. BSU recently had the privilege of creating a new Alpha Kappa Alpha chapter in 2018. Student 3 says "Before I found Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated, I didn't have many black women outside of my family that supported me. I like that I'm in an organization now where I know that's so many people who support me, and I support them in return." Being aware of the school's many resources on campus for women of color created a community where cultures are celebrated openly.

Summary of Findings and Future Research

This research was conducted with the hope that the results may be used to help Bridgewater State University faculty, administration, and student body understand and become mindful of the experiences that black women face at this PWI. The suggestions from the subjects should be taken into consideration and applied to the university to promote a culturally inclusive campus. Four important recurring topics in this research include: alleviating the pressure for black people to be spokespeople for their race, valuing outside cultural perspectives, not underestimating their intelligence, and encouraging students if they are not meeting the bar academically instead of doubting or losing hope.

Future research should focus on implementing educational interventions/workshops for faculty to treat and prevent the issues discussed in this research. Another qualitative study would be helpful to compare the results and prove the effectiveness of the interventions. Afterwards, feedback could be drawn from students to compare their relationships in school before the intervention and after and evaluate if the quality of their college experience has changed.

In addition, there should be more diverse and inclusive faculty as well. In the context of this research, this means that there should be more black faculty so that black students feel more adjusted and included in an educational environment. According to the students, the non-black faculty members possessed certain traits and pre-judgements that made the black students feel uncomfortable in their classroom settings. To educate the non-black faculty members, all faculty should be required to take a diversity workshop run by a person of color. A person of color would most likely be able to deliver the message more appropriately and provide personal life experiences that would make the class much more meaningful. This workshop should discuss unaware biases that

people may have about black people and preexisting judgements to avoid in the classrooms in order for the faculty to feel more culturally confident.

Next, the school should hire more faculty of color, who would then go on to serve as advisors as well. This would allow black students to have someone to go to so that they can discuss sensitive cultural topics. This came up when student 2 described that she had no one to talk to after reaching out to her professor, advisor, and department chair about her needs and concerns in the classroom. Perhaps if there had been an advisor of color to provide the student emotional support, the student's voice would be heard and understood.

Lastly, the limitations of this study included having a small number of participants. Our sample size was a total of nine people. Another limitation was the range of skin tones. Only three people identified as lighter skin toned while the remaining six identified as darker skin toned. As a result, there was not an equal amount of lighter skin toned individuals to make a substantial comparison. If this study was done again, a larger sample size with an equal range of skin tones would be compiled. Overall, faculty members and students should create a safe environment for black women to learn and build relationships without feeling outcast from their community.

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